

## Haloes -- Matthew 1:18-25

Saint Marks United Methodist Church, BLUE CHRISTMAS Worship [December 19] 2013

<sup>1:18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. <sup>20</sup> But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). <sup>24</sup> When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, <sup>25</sup> but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

**One of my favorite writers, John Shea, tells of being in a parking lot on a day something like just about any day out Quarrier G or at the mall on the weekend. He saw a woman, who was on her very last leg. She was trying to carry too many packages and trying to do too many things at the same time. As she approached the car, Shea heard her muttering, "I'm not going to make it. I'm not going to make it."**

**Shea felt sympathy for her, and in his most pastoral caregiving, reassuring voice, he called out to the frazzled woman, "Oh yes, you will." He was taken aback when she whirled on him and shouted, "You don't even have the faintest idea. Just shut up. Just shut up." And then she walked away, while Shea tried to count how many shoe lace holes were in his shoes, thinking, "Wow! Wow, indeed!"**

Some of the words I've been overhearing during this Advent season:

- It's gotten to the point where I just HATE Christmas. There's so much to do at work; I'm staying late. I have to pack to go visit the relatives. I've not finished my shopping. My spouse won't help me wrap the gifts, but just keeps coming up with more "helpful ideas" which end up being things that I need to do.
- We're celebrating that ministry at our church for recovering addicts. "Celebrate Recovery" it's called and it's for people of all kinds of former addictions. The one woman whose sobriety we always celebrate is Wanda. She was an alcoholic for

sooo long and then finally overcame the demon in the bottle. She was sober for just over a year, when last year at Christmas time, she was killed by a drunk driver.

- I just can't get my heart into it. I want to be happy. I know I should be happy. But I just can't get it all done to everyone's satisfaction – most of all mine. It just doesn't matter how hard I try. So I don't feel like trying any more. I want to, but I just am too tired to fake it anymore.
- Every time I turn the corner, I keep seeing his face. Christmas was always such a big deal for him. I can't do MY Christmas, on my own. I can't have it MY way, because I just keep seeing him in everything. It's the worst time of the year for me. I'd like to go to bed on Thanksgiving Day and not wake up until New Year's Day.
- Christmas is made for children. Without children in the house, there's just no excitement. Honestly, it's just another day. I'd rather not be bothered by it all.
- I feel soooo guilty. I know that I'm not supposed to feel this way. I know that I'm supposed to feel good about God and Jesus and Family and all that. But, it just doesn't do it. It's just so daggone, daggone crazy! I don't have time to look at my to-do list. No, I don't want to; it's too depressing. I'm just so tired of it all.
- It's not the way it used to be. Christmas just brings back memories of how good it used to be, and it's never going to be that good again. Never. I don't want to go through the charade of pretending that it is.
- I'll never be able to do it as good as my parents did. They did it right. I just can't get it. I mess it up every year. I'm tired of trying. I just want to surrender and say, "OK, I quit! I can't do it right! Go someplace else if you want it right.
- I don't really need all that big family stuff. I prefer just having it as time alone. All those stupid television shows. Nobody really does it like that. It's just a make-believe to make other oepole feel guilty for not getting it right. Well, I don't need to "get it right." I'm quite fine here on my own.
- I don't know why it makes me cry. But I can't think of Christmas, of going through

the stuff – even just the church stuff – without crying. I don't know why; I just do. It's embarrassing making up excuses for something I don't understand myself.

- I'm afraid this Christmas is going to be the last one that I will enjoy. It's going to be different after this year. If we even make it to Christmas this year. And then it will never be the same again. And I just don't know how to handle it this year. It's just too much to handle.

How DID we get here?

It's not the way Mary and Joseph did it.

It was not until the year 1223 that we have the first historical record of a nativity scened being portrayed in celebration of the birth of Jesus. (by Saint Francis) But since that time the manger in the stable has become a symbol of so many things – many of which are not so much a blessing.

**People, partiularly in the church, like to talk about the over commercialization of Christmas as the big sin. But, perhaps, it is the worship of family that has become a bigger idolatry, but we get uncomfortable hearing such scandalous things, even when Jesus said them.**

**“One way that I've come to think of this Christmas like a house.** It has three rooms, each one encircling the entire building. The outer circle is the room of culture. In this room are all the societal expressions of Christmas – shopping, gift-giving, TV specials, choral ensembles, office parties, the Santa Claus story, and its endless variations, famiy gatherings, decorations, evergreen trees, sending out Christmas cards with pictures of children and family updates, etc.

“The middle circle is the room of the church. In this room are all the church activities from liturgies to lectures to music to plays that are meant to honor the birthday of Jesus and celebrate the Good News.

“The inner circle is the mystical room. In this room the birth of Christ happens in the soul, and all the religious language of Christmas is used in unconventional ways

with very different meanings.

“During [the Advent and] Christmas season[s] we have to live in the rooms of culture and church. There is no escaping them. Unfortunately, these two rooms often do not get along. In particular, the church is always accusing the culture of materializing and debasing Christmas. At best, it reduces Christmas to peace, love and joy without any mention of the why, what or how of peace, love and joy. At worst, it is a time of year that is only appreciated for its economic power. ...

“As for the inner, mystical room – the culture does not know it exists, and the church, to the degree it knows it exists, is suspicious of it.”<sup>i</sup>

But it is in this room alone – where Christ is born **in us**, moment after moment.

But – truth be told – **the only way we can take Christmas and keep it** – is to **encounter it in the way that Joseph and Mary did – in that innermost room:**

- It was, **and is**, a **mystery**.
- It was, **and is**, **incapable of full explanation**.
- It was, **and is**, **incapable of being adequately predicted or anticipated or controlled**
- It was, **and is**, **incapable of being fully meaningful if it is tied to something that can be taken away from us**.

The banner out in front of the church reads: **At Christmas, the divine became human, so that the human can become divine.**

It's not like we become almighty and omniscient. But, just like Jesus was fully human and fully God in one human body, so too are we able to have our human bodies also occupy the same place and time with the divine.

And that holy experience comes in **MOMENTS** or perhaps better called **FLASHES**, like the way angels came to the people of old:

- Flashes or moments **that enable us to let go**
- **Let go of the stuff in the two outer rooms of the house and to enter, even if briefly, into that innermost room**
- **Where we are able to see a halo on some circumstance of life.**
- **Haloes used to appear in paintings I saw as a child, identifying the Holy Family. But, perhaps because we have become so enlightened, so sophisticated, so ... whatever, we've kind of let go of the notion of haloes ... what a shame!**
- **A halo that, for a moment, wraps light around something so that we see it differently, see it from a perspective we usually don't notice.**
- **Joseph had a moment where, like in a dream, he was able to capture scandalous circumstances in a wholly different light, which changed him and Mary and a baby for the rest of their lives. But it came only in a moment – in a moment of haloes experienced.**
- **And then the halo recedes, not in a flash, but dimly recedes. And the thing appears as it did before the moment, before the flash. But an aura, a memory of light, remains. And our vision is altered.**
- **The MOMENT is gone – over – but leaves a residue that leads us to ponder them in our hearts for a very long time, just what it all means.**
- **Which is more important – the MOMENT/the FLASH – or the pondering? I don't know. But both depend upon the other. And they require our entrance into that innermost room.**

Together now we will read responsively the Incarnation Hymn by Saint Symeon. I invite you to pause as you read (and I'll try to help that) when you can either close your eyes, or go into that innermost room, and see that FLASH or a MOMENT in which the words becomes something more than black lines on white paper. There are haloes

involved.

**May you discover MOMENTS of HALOES in this season, by taking time and paying attention. God will do the rest.**

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.**

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<sup>i</sup> John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for christian Preachers and Teachers: Following Love Into Mystgery* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2010) Locations 624-37, Kindle.